

THE PATRIARCH ABRAHAM



Genesis 12:1 "Now the LORD said to Abram, 'Go from your country and your kindred and your father's house to the land that I will show you. (And) I will make of you a great nation, and I will bless you, and make your name great, so that . . . all the families of the earth shall be blessed (by you).'"

I was the last class in my seminary required to study both the 'old' 1928 Prayerbook and the draft 1976 'new' Book of Common Prayer. One of the significant differences was the Sunday Lectionary proposed in the new Prayerbook. This new Lectionary was first published in 1974 by the Consultation on Church Union (COCU), a broad ecumenical group, and was based on the 1969 three-year lectionary produced by the Roman Catholic Church following the reforms of the Second Vatican Council.

In the old Prayerbook there will simply three readings for each Sunday in a one-year repetitive cycle. The new three-year lectionary worked like this, a good portion of the Gospel of Matthew was read for Year One, Mark for Year Two, and Luke for Year Three, with much of the Gospel of John interspersed throughout all three years. A good portion of Acts and the Epistles were then read sequentially throughout the three years. And the Old Testament reading each Sunday was chosen to accent or complement the Gospel Reading for the day. With this shared Lectionary, Christians from a variety of different denominations, viz. Catholics, Episcopalians, Lutherans, Presbyterians, and Methodists, were for the first time all hearing the exact same Readings on Sunday morning! A great ecumenical achievement!

But alas, the Evangelicals complained. They complained that by pairing the Old Testament Reading with the Gospel in this way, we were breaking up the great stories of the Old Testament. So, in 1994 a new so-called Revised Common Lectionary was adopted by most of the English-speaking denominations in the world which rectified this concern of the Evangelicals, such that during the long summer months now, what Anglicans call "The Season after Pentecost", sequential readings from the Old Testament are now heard. So, for Year One, congregations will hear a good portion of the story of the Patriarchs and then

Joseph, and Moses and the Exodus. In Year Two, we hear the story of the rise and fall of the Kings of Israel, of Saul, David, and Solomon. And in Year Three, we hear from the Prophets and the Wisdom literature of the Old Testament. Many of us rejoiced that this new lectionary allows our congregations to hear a larger portion of the Old Testament history sequentially.

And so today, as we move into the long series of Sundays after Pentecost, in Year One, we begin the story of the Patriarch Abraham. Oh, I am well aware that most of us think we know those stories from Sunday School. But I am here to tell you that we don't, that what we learned in Sunday School was only the sanitized short version of their lives. So, we all need to listen closely to the readings this summer in order to catch important details that will move us from our childish understanding of the lives of the Patriarchs to a mature and informed faith.

So, we begin today with the familiar story of Abraham, the first Patriarch, the heralded father of three of the world's great religions: Judaism, Christianity, and Islam. Abraham, as you may remember from Sunday School, left his home in the Ur of the Chaldees (which is in present day Iraq) and journeyed to land of Canaan, to an unknown land which God promised would be Abraham's and his descendants forever. Only Abraham and his wife Sarah didn't have any descendants, and they were already old,

having left their home in the Ur of the Chaldees when Abraham was already 75 years old, and when Sarah, as the Bible says, 'had ceased to be after the manner of women,' meaning that she was post-menopausal. Nonetheless Abraham's and Sarah's willingness to believe this promise of God, that God would provide a land for them and their descendants forever, and to act upon that promise, is a shining example of great faith and trust in God.

But there is much more to the story than that, more than we learned in Sunday School. First, it was Abraham's father, Terah, who first led his family from the Ur of the Chaldees towards Canaan, not Abraham. And the group included not only Abraham and Sarah, but two of Abraham's brothers and their wives, and the son of another of Abraham's brothers, named Lot, whose father had died back in the old country. The family settled for a time at Haran, an ancient village in present day Turkey, Urfa, at an important geographical crossroads, both between the Euphrates and Tigris rivers and at the border between ancient Mesopotamia and Anatolia, what we call Asia Minor. Terah died and was buried there in Haran. In today's reading, God is now calling Abraham to leave Haran to take possession of the land God has promised him. So, Abraham, his wife Sarah, and nephew Lot headed to the Holy Land. Abraham's remaining brother Nahor and his family stay behind. This is important, because later Abraham and Isaac will

send their sons to go find wives among the family back home in Haran, and not among those Canaanite women.

But there is much more to the story than that, and some parts of the story reveal that Abraham and Sarah were very real and fallible human beings, like us. They had their moments of doubt and despair, like us. This is not the Abraham from our Sunday School classes. For example, when they first finally arrived in Canaan, there was a severe famine in the land, so the group headed on to Egypt to seek relief (Joseph's family will also journey to Egypt during another famine in another couple of generations). On the way to Egypt, Abraham told his wife Sarah to lie, and to say that she was not his wife, but was his 'sister', so that the Egyptians would not kill him and take her away from him, because she was such a beauty, even in her eighties. And so, Sarah lied, and even so she ended up in the Pharaoh's harem, for which Abraham and Lot were greatly rewarded, with flocks of sheep and donkeys and oxen and camel and male & female servants. When the Pharaoh discovered the lie, he sent Abraham and his family packing, but they got to keep the flocks and servants that they had awarded. Indeed, Lot and Abraham had so many flocks that upon their return home the land could not sustain the numbers. So, Abraham and Lot separated, with Lot moving into the plains of the Jordan, while Abraham stayed by the oaks of Mamre in Canaan. Interestingly Abraham and

Sarah will tell the same lie again later in their dealings with King Abimelech. Abraham and Sarah were not saints. Nor was Lot as will be remembered from the story of Sodom and Gomorrah where he settled.

But more importantly, after a while Abraham and Sarah also began to doubt God's promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation. So much so that Sarah gave to Abraham her husband, her servant, Hagar, so that he might conceive a son through her, in order to fulfill God's promise (later Jacob's wives Leah and Rachel will do the same thing when they think they are infertile). Hagar, we will soon hear, did indeed give Abraham a son, named Ishmael, and Abraham, we are told, loved Ishmael very much.

Next week we will hear the famous story of those three strange visitors who passed through the region on their way to Sodom and Gomorrah, and who prophesized that Sarah at 85, would be pregnant by the time they returned again that way in a year, and Sarah upon hearing this laughed. But Sarah did become pregnant and gave birth to her only child, Isaac, the next year as promised. And Isaac and Ishmael played together as children, but you will see in two weeks' time that Sarah became jealous for her child, and for his inheritance, for his claim to the land God promised them. She didn't need Hagar's child anymore now that she had a son of her own. And Abraham gave in and

allowed Sarah to banish Hagar and her son, Ishmael, to cast them out into the desert with few provisions to sustain them. The two of them would have died there had God not interceded to save them both. And Ishmael did indeed grow up and became the father of a great nation, the desert people, whom we call Arabs today.

But then strangely, as we will hear in three weeks' time, Abraham will feel called by God to sacrifice his only son, Isaac. You will surely remember this odd story from Sunday School. According to the Scriptures, note that Abraham, we are told, got up very early in the morning and left camp, apparently without talking to Sarah first. Abraham took Isaac and some servants and went to the mountain to which God directed him. Then Abraham left the servants at the bottom of the mountain, so they could not interfere, and he and Isaac climbed to mountain to make sacrifice. On the way up, young Isaac, carrying the wood, asked his father again and again where the animal was for the sacrifice, and Abraham answered his son again and again that God would provide the lamb for himself. And God, as we all remember from Sunday School, intervened at the last moment and spared Isaac and rewarded Abraham once again for his great faith and trust in God, for his willingness to sacrifice his only son Isaac, whom he loved, but the consequences of that event lingered for the remainder of Abraham's life.

For if we listen to the Scriptures carefully, Abraham never went home again after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac. Abraham did not return to Hebron, where Sarah was, where they lived, where they settled when they first arrived in Canaan. Instead, we are told instead that Abraham settled in Beersheba. In fact, Abraham is never recorded as returning to Hebron ever again, except for one time, to mourn and weep at Sarah's death and to bury her in a cave he had purchased by the oaks of Mamre. There is a ring of authenticity in lots of the details of this story. The story of the Patriarch Abraham is not some stylized fable of a man, but the struggle of an ordinary person to be faithful to God.

Later, Abraham will send his chief servant to go and find a suitable wife for Isaac back in the old country, back in Haran, and the servant takes lots of gold and silver and camels and ornate garments to present to Rebekah, who was the granddaughter of Terah, the daughter of Abraham's brother Nahor. When the servant brings Rebekah home to Isaac, notice that Isaac is not in Beersheba with his father Abraham. He is in the tent of his mother in the Negev. It would appear that not only Abraham's and Sarah's relationship became estranged after the attempted sacrifice of Isaac, but also the relationship between Abraham and his son. Indeed, in Genesis we are told that Abraham took a new wife, Keturah.

So at the end of his life, Abraham is living without his son Ishmael whom we were told again and again that he loved, a child he allowed to be cast out into his desert to please his wife Sarah, and Abraham is without his beloved Sarah, his wife for so many years, for whom he wept and mourned at her death, and he is now also separated from his son, Isaac. The end of Abraham's life must have been very hard indeed, and though Abraham had six more sons with Keturah, he left everything, we are told, to Isaac, whom he loved.

So, Isaac took Rebekah, and she became his wife; and he was comforted after his mother's death, but alas, was there any comfort for poor Abraham. When Abraham died, his sons Isaac and Ishmael, we are told, came to bury him, in the cave by the oaks of Mamre, buried next to his beloved wife Sarah, from whom he had been estranged for so many years. God's promise that Abraham would be the father of a great nation was indeed fulfilled, but that promise cost Abraham greatly. Amen.